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The Tail of the Boggleman

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THE TAIL OF THE BOGGLEMANN

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Late one night two children - we'll call them Hansel and Gretel, for fun - went out together on an urgent errand required of them by either their father or their stepmother, we won't say which. They had to pass through a dark and lonely wood, known to be haunted by ghosts and Boggemann. Fortunately, Gretel knew a few magic spells for protection against night creatures. She had learned them from her friend, an Old Wise Woman, who lived in a Gingerbread House across the river from where they were travelling.

Hansel strode ahead with convincing self importance, his eyes fixed on the path. Gretel, feeling rather safer as the second in line in case they were set upon, followed behind, peering carefully into the shadows between the trees.

As often happens in dreams and stories, especially at night, the woods seemed to go on forever. The children grew tired. Eventually they came to a fallen tree trunk, shortened by rot and breakage to about four feet in length. Since it was right alongside the path, they chose it as their resting spot and sat down.

Tangled vines began to creep around the log and crawl toward their feet. Neither of them noticed until suddenly their ankles were seized and held fast. In the moment that it took them to gasp and look down, the vines changed into a strong, snake-like tail with a flat, spear-shaped tip. It emerged from the end of the log near Gretel. They looked toward Hansel's end and saw pointy ears, beady eyes, and sharp, jagged teeth framed by a malicious grin. And before they could even catch their breath at that, the log was not a log but the Boggemann's back. He stood up, tumbling them to the ground, but held their ankles tight with his tail, chuckling in a ready to eat children sort of way.

Gretel never gave him a chance. In a moment the Wise Woman's spell was on her lips.

Listen Boggemann
I know what to say
Tell us a story
Let us go our way

Instantly the Boggemann's expression changed. He smiled broadly and his eyes became kind.

"Dear children," he said, "Do you know

what it is to be made up of conflicting temperaments? On one hand to have an inquisitive mind, generous in the attention it lavishes on the world, inclined to literary reflection and the cultivation of sensitivities - and on the other to have a temper that is tricky, mischievous, even threatening, altogether filled with desire and wrath? I doubt that you can begin to imagine it, and I'll think better of myself if I don't ask you to. Thank you for calling forth my higher nature. Sit down, and I'll tell you a story about a woman, a dumpling, and Lord Jizo."

—Once there was a woman named Murasake - not the famous one - well known for her rice dumplings. Fishermen, boatmen, and others who worked along the nearby river came to her house and purchased them by the dozen, and she made enough money to support herself modestly. One day a dumpling fell from her cook spoon, rolled across her earthen floor, and slid down a small hole. Murasake bent over to fetch it and tried to widen the hole with her fingers. Suddenly the whole floor caved in and she fell into another world, where she landed in the middle of a dusty road. She looked up and saw, through an opening in the clouds, a worm's eye view of her kitchen - just for a moment - then the hole in the clouds closed and the kitchen disappeared.

Often, confronted with a overwhelming mystery, the mind refuses to dwell too long on the impossible. One takes refuge in some token, accessible by its familiarity. So Murasake was taken by an obsession with her rice dumpling -

Here the Boggemann interrupted himself and asked, "You do know what rice is, don't you?"

Hansel and Gretel shook their heads nervously.

"It's a grain, quite common in many parts of the world. It is eaten whole, instead of ground to a powder, as usually happens to poor witless grains around here. For present purposes, consider a rice dumpling essentially similar to the potato dumpling you already know, but a little chewier."

He continued -

—The only thing the woman could think about was what had happened to her dumpling. She set off down the road searching for it, and soon came to a stone statue of Lord Jizo, with his crozier in one hand, and a great

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pearl of wisdom in the other. She approached the statue and bowed.

"Lord Jizo," she asked, "did you see my dumpling?"

"Yes," he replied. "I saw it go rolling by a few minutes ago. But don't try to follow it. Down this road is a wicked Oni, and Onis eat people."

But Murasake ignored his advice and ran after the dumpling. Soon she came to another stone Jizo.

"Lord Jizo," she asked, "did you happen to see a pretty little dumpling go rolling by?"

"Yes indeed," he replied. "But don't try to find it. Down this road is a wicked Oni, and Onis eat stupid people."

But she ran again in the same direction, hopeful that she was coming nearer and nearer to her beloved dumpling. Soon she saw another stone Jizo.

"Lord Jizo," she asked, "I lost a wonderful rice dumpling that I had made. I think it went rolling down this road. Have you seen it?"

"Forget the dumpling," said Jizo. "Here comes the Oni. Now hide behind my robes."

A monstrous Oni, reeking of sulphur, approached the stone Jizo and bowed.

"Lord Jizo," he said simply, "I smell live meat nearby, and I am hungry."

At this point Murasake felt the impossibilities of her circumstance wash over her like a wave. She sighed. The Oni heard her.

"Aha!" he cried, pulling her around by her sleeve. "Here is my supper."

"Good Oni," said the stone Jizo, "suppose you do me a favor. I happen to know that this woman makes excellent rice dumplings. Please consider engaging her as your cook."

The Oni hesitated. It is to Lord Jizo's credit that most of the Onis in that territory were about half converted to the Noble Path. Finally he snorted, nodded, and dragged the confused woman away.

He took her to a falling down hovel where a dozen Onis lived together. He showed her the cookpot and gave her a magic spoon.

"To make a pot of rice," he explained, "you place a single grain in the boiling water, no more. Stir once, it will become two. Stir twice,

it will become four. Again, eight. Soon the pot will be full. Then you make the dumplings."

For a long time, possibly for years, the woman did as she was told and cooked for the Onis. She acted as if she were in a fog, as if the sigh she had uttered behind Jizo's robes had never left her. Then one day, while stirring the pot, she remembered the dumpling that had fallen through her floor. In that moment, she woke from her daydream. Taking the magic spoon with her, she left the hovel, intent on escape.

She couldn't find the road she had arrived by, but she soon came to a lake. On the beach she found a decrepit rowboat. She was already far out onto the water when the Onis came running toward the shoreline.

Onis are too full of rocks and metals to swim, but their appetites are prodigious. They waded into the lake and began to drink. Soon fish were flopping on the mud and the boat was grounded. The Onis raised their heads and saw the woman stand up in the boat and angrily wave the spoon at them.

A sad picture of mortality it was. Her stranded boat. Her little magic spoon. The world she had accidentally fallen into.

The Onis burst out laughing. Streams of lake water erupted from their mouths and noses. They threw back their heads, roaring, and geysers of water shot into the air. In a few minutes all the demons had drowned and the lake was full, with a current across it this time. The boat lurched off toward a horizon of water and sky.

Murasake laid down in the bottom of the boat. She held the magic spoon on her chest. High above, clouds raced with the little craft, sometimes overtaking it, sometimes falling behind.

Within the boat, her stillness began to coalesce. It merged with the sky, the water, the magic spoon, the boat itself. Finally, the woman simply faded away; at least what we used to call the woman: a few salts and some electrical charges. The stillness sailed on, continuing to consolidate itself, heading for the womb awaiting it on the far side of the horizon.

"A happy ending after all," said the Boglemann. "Very happy. Better to start over than keep making the same stupid mistakes. You children many understand that better when you are older."

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As he stood and stretched, his kind smile changed back to a demonic grin. His tail unwound from their ankles and he slowly faded away, in bits and pieces. The last to go were his eyes - cat like, of course - already darting to the sides, searching for mischief to make.

"Look here," said Hansel, grimacing. "The story has been told, the Bogglemann is free again, and we're still in the middle of the woods. Next time, cast the spell and tell him to walk along with us until he's done."

— Ed Humpnal

NOTE: The tale told by the Bogglemann owes a debt to a story first related by Lafcadio Hearn in the late nineteenth century. Lafcadio, a prolific and restless writer, was born in Greece, raised in Ireland, studied in England and France, worked in the United States and Japan, and finally changed his name to Koizumi Yakumo and became a subject of the Japanese Emperor. The Bogglemann started with Lafcadio's woman and her runaway dumpling, but improvised freely thereafter, as indeed Lafcadio did throughout his whole life.

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